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**American
Folklore Society**
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Athabascan Myths

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Source: *The Journal of American Folklore*, Jan. - Mar., 1900, Vol. 13, No. 48 (Jan. - Mar., 1900), pp. 11-18

Published by: American Folklore Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/533729>

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ATHABASCAN MYTHS.¹

LOUCHEUX TRIBE.

I. LITTLE HAIRY MAN.

THE Loucheux Indians once cached a quantity of meat, which the Polar Bear (*Sø'*) discovered and began to eat. The people were unable to kill the animal themselves, so they called upon the Little Hairy Man. The bear came to rob the cache (*tsi*) at night, and the Little Man concealed himself in a tree to await the coming of the thief. The people were to give the Little Man a big knife if he killed the bear; he took this knife with him into the tree, and when the bear appeared he jumped down upon and easily killed it, thus gaining possession of the knife. The Little Man left the place, and continued his wanderings as usual. As he went along, he came upon two brothers who were separated from the rest of the tribe, so he asked them what they were doing. They replied that they were just travelling about, and in turn they asked the Little Man what he was doing. "I am wandering about also; let us journey together." The Little Man called one of his companions "Breaking Mountain" and the other "Breaking Sticks." They asked him what his name was, and he replied that he had no name, but that anything that they asked of him would be granted. They decided to call him Little Hairy Man. As they went along together, they came upon two deserted houses, which they occupied for a time. Little Man and Breaking Mountain went off to hunt and cut wood, while Breaking Sticks stayed at home to attend to the cooking. When the hunters returned they found no dinner cooked, but Breaking Sticks was lying in his blanket groaning. The following day Little Man and Breaking Sticks went out, leaving Breaking Mountain to take care of the camp, but as he repeated his brother's experience Little Man said, "You two go and cut wood and I will stay at home and get the dinner." As soon as they were gone a strange pigmy entered the house and said, "What are you doing here? Who gave you permission to stop here?" The stranger tried to whip Little Hairy Man, but the latter was too quick for him, snatched the whip away and drove the fellow out and into a hole under the other house. When the two brothers returned a dinner was awaiting them, and the Little Man said, "So that is what troubled you two. The pigmy gave you a whipping." "You must have caught it yourself to-day," they replied. "No, I whipped him and chased him into his burrow

¹ Told by a Loucheux woman at McPherson, the northernmost Hudson's Bay trading post, to Captain J. W. Mills.

under the other building." After they had dined they went to examine the retreat of the mysterious stranger. By means of a strong cord and an old kettle, Breaking Mountain was lowered into the hole. He came back saying that he had seen a door at the bottom of the pit. Breaking Sticks next went down and reported the finding of the corpse of the pigmy. Little Hairy Man then went down, taking his big knife with him. He knocked on the door which he found and a voice answered, "Come in!" On entering he was met by a two-headed individual, who asked, "Are you the person who killed my son?" "Yes," replied the Little Hairy Man. At this the monster rushed upon him, and tried to kill him. Little Man succeeded in cutting off both the heads with his big knife. He then noticed another door to the apartment, on which he knocked, and received the invitation to enter as before. This time he was met by a creature with three heads, who asked the same question, and upon receiving an affirmative reply tried to kill him. Little Man overcame his opponent and chopped off his three heads. To this apartment there was a door, at which he knocked and entered to find a four-headed being, whom he killed after a severe struggle. Before him stood yet another door, through which he passed to find three pretty women. He was much pleased with the appearance of the prettiest one, who gave him a ring. He took them to the entrance, and sent them up one by one in the kettle. When it came the turn of the Little Man to be hauled out, Breaking Sticks, who thought Little Man would want all the women for his own wives, said, "Let us cut the line." "No," said Breaking Mountain, "he helps us very much, and does things which we cannot do." But before he had finished speaking his brother had cut the line, allowing the kettle to fall with the Little Hairy Man to the bottom of the shaft. A small dog that had belonged to the pigmy came and licked the wounds of Little Man, brought him bread, and finally showed him the way to escape. Little Man found that the brothers and the women whom he had rescued were gone, so he took his big knife and set off after them. As he was passing through some thick woods, he heard the sounds of a struggle, and soon came upon the dead body of a moose, *tŭng-ik*, over which a woodpecker, a wasp, and a little wood-worm were fighting. Little Man wished to settle their differences for them, so he divided the carcass, giving the meat to the wasp, the fat to the woodpecker, and the bones to the wood-worm. Then he started off, but the woodpecker flew after him, and called him back. They all thanked him, and told him if he ever got in trouble he might turn into a woodpecker, a wasp, or a little worm. He thanked them and went on his way. Little Man came to a big lake; to avoid the long journey around, he wished himself a wood-

pecker, and in that form flew out over the lake. When he was half way across he became very tired, and, seeing a stick of driftwood, wished to be a worm. He crawled into the stick, where he remained until he felt it strike against the shore. Then he came out and found a large quantity of fresh chips around him. He soon caught sight of a small house and wished to be transformed into a wasp. In this guise he entered the house and found the brothers and the three women inside. The girl whom he had chosen was cooking food. Little Man went back into the forest and resumed his natural shape, then he returned with his big knife to the house. He asked the girl what she was doing, and she said she was cooking. "May I help you?" "Yes," said she, after consulting her master. Little Hairy Man helped her place the food, and he arranged it in six portions. "Why do you set six places?" said she; "the cooks do not eat with their masters." But he replied, "We will eat with them this once to talk about old times." Her master said, "Very well." When they sat down to eat, he placed the ring she had given him beside the plate of his sweetheart, who recognized it at once, and turned pale as she concealed it. Breaking Mountain began to tell the story of their desertion of Little Man, and said he was sorry, because Little Man was so useful. Breaking Sticks laughed and said, "Well, I laughed when I heard the kettle rattling down, and the Little Man squealing." At this the Little Man jumped up and killed them all. Little Man left the house and went on his way again.

He found a small house in the forest, and on entering discovered a pretty woman in it. He asked her to marry him, but she said that she was married and her husband was away. She was afraid of her husband, and dared not run away with Little Man. He said, "I will kill him," but she declared that no one could do that. When the husband returned she asked him how any one could kill him, and he answered: "First, there is a mountain-lion; if you kill it, a bear will come from the carcass, then a wolf will come from the bear, a wolverine from the wolf, a rabbit from the wolverine, a partridge from the rabbit, an egg from the partridge: only by striking me on the forehead with that egg can you kill me." The next day, when the man was away, the woman told Little Hairy Man how he could kill her husband. He killed the mountain-lion and all the other animals, and obtained the egg, which he took to the woman. When her husband came home she wanted to hunt lice in his head; while his head was in her lap she struck him with the egg and killed him. She and Little Hairy Man were married and lived [happily] together.

II. THE RAVEN (TE-TCI^N).¹

There once lived an old couple who wished to see their only daughter married to a rich man. When any one arrived at their camp, the old man sent his son down to the landing to see if the stranger was provided with the necessary bone beads upon his clothing, in order that he might be received according to his rank. One day the boy came running in, saying that some one had come whom he would like to have for a brother-in-law, for he had a great number of fine beads. The mother went down to the river bank, and saw a richly dressed stranger, whom she also thought would make a suitable husband for her daughter. She noticed that the shore was wet and muddy, so she procured some bark and tore it into strips for the stranger to walk upon. He was invited to enter their tipi and was seated next the girl. A dog was tied in the corner of the lodge, and the visitor said, "I cannot eat while that dog is in here;" so the woman, thinking the man must be a very great personage to be so particular, took the dog away into the forest and killed it. The next morning as she went for wood, she noticed that the earth around the body of the dog was marked with bird tracks, and that its eyes had been picked out. When she returned to the camp she told what she had seen, and insisted upon having all present take off their moccasins that she might see their feet, as she had heard of the Raven deceiving people by appearing in the human form. The stranger, who was really the Raven, took his moccasins off, and slipped them on so quickly that his feet were not noticed. The girl had promised to marry him, and he insisted upon having her go away with him at once, as he feared that his true character would be discovered. He arranged to return in a few days, and took his bride down to his canoe. As soon as they set off down the river it began to rain. The Raven was seated in front of the woman, who noticed that the falling rain was washing out something white from his back; this made her suspicious, and she determined to escape from the canoe. Reaching forward, she succeeded in tying the tail of the Raven's coat to a cross-bar of the canoe. She then asked to be set ashore for a minute, saying that she would come right back. He told her not to go far, but she started to run for home as soon as she got behind the trees. The Raven also tried to get ashore, but his tail was tied, and he could not succeed in his human form; so he

¹ The common raven, *Corvus corax americanus*, is quite abundant at McPherson and throughout the Loucheux country. It is usually called the "crow" by the whites in the far north, but the true crow, *C. americanus*, is not found in the Loucheux territory, the northern limit of its distribution being the mouth of the Liard River.

resumed the form of the raven and cried out to the girl, "Once more I cheat you," then he caw-cawed and flew away.

When the girl reported this to her mother the old woman asked her what she meant, and the girl answered that the rich son-in-law was the Raven, who had come to them dressed in his own lime, which the rain had melted, and so exposed the trick.

The Raven was always cheating the people, so they took his beak away from him. After a time he went away up the river and made a raft which he loaded with moss, and came floating down to the camps upon it. He told the people that his head was sore where his beak had been torn off, and that he was lying in the moss to cool it. Then he went away for two or three days, and made several rafts ; as the people saw these coming down the river, they thought that there were a large number of people upon the rafts, who were coming to help the Raven regain his beak ; so they held a council and decided to send the beak away in the hands of a young girl, that she might take it to an old woman who lived all alone at some distance from the camp. The Raven concealed himself among them and heard their plans, so when the girl came back he went to the old woman, and told her that the girl wished to have the beak returned. The old woman suspected nothing and gave him his beak, which he put on and flew away, cawing with pleasure at his success. The supposed people that had been seen upon the rafts proved to be nothing but the tufts or hummocks of bog moss which are commonly known as *têtes de femmes*.

III. THE WOLF AND WOLVERINE.

There was once a Wolverine who married a Wolf, and for some time he was very faithful in providing beaver for food. In the course of time he stayed longer upon his hunting trips, and brought home fewer beaver for his wife to cook. She reproached him for this, and he said that he had to go farther for beaver now, and that was why he was detained so long. His wife thought there was surely something wrong, and decided to watch him. One day, as he set out on one of his hunting trips in his canoe, she followed along the river bank under cover of the forest. At length she saw her husband go ashore with a beaver which he had killed, and with which he entered a tipi that stood by the riverside. When he went away again, the wife went into the camp and saw a Wildcat sitting before the kettle in which the beaver was cooking. She saw that her husband had been unfaithful, and determined to kill the Wildcat. She told the Cat to look into the kettle and she would see herself there ; when the Wildcat looked into the kettle the Wolf pushed her in, so that her face was burned so severely that death resulted. The Wolf then dragged

the Wildcat to the top of the bank overlooking the landing-place, and hid herself in the adjoining bushes. Her husband came back with more beavers, and as he came up the bank he said to the Wildcat which he saw above him, "Are you waiting for me? What are you laughing at me for?" for the shrivelled and grinning head appeared to be laughing. But when he saw that the Cat was dead, he exclaimed, "Ah, that is what the trouble is," and he began to weep. He stayed a long time at the camp, and finally carried the Wildcat away into the forest. At last he started for home, and his wife ran back in time to be at work carrying wood when he arrived. The Wolverine asked, "Why is there no fire?" "I have been out all day gathering wood," replied his wife; "why are you back so soon to-day?" "Because I have found a new place where there are plenty of beaver," said the Wolverine. But he was very sad and unhappy for some time afterward. "Why are you so different lately?" asked the Wolf. But he would not tell her, and hunted very faithfully and brought home many beavers, so that they lived very contentedly together ever afterward.

SLAVEY TRIBE.

Told by Tenegorley. (Simpson, winter of 1897-98.)

IV. THE GREAT BEAVER (TSE-NI' TCÍ').

A family of very large beavers lived on the Great Slave Lake, long ago, and the lodge is still there. Well, they all started down the Mackenzie River, and when they had gone a long distance, one of them killed one of his companions and roasted the flesh, but left it hanging before the fire while he fell asleep. While he slept a wolverine came along and took the roasted beaver and left a roll of moss in its place. After a time the sleeping beaver awoke. When he found that the roasted flesh was gone he was vexed, so he took the bark dish that he had placed under the roasting meat to catch the fat and emptied it into the fire, saying, "Burn, and never go out." And so the fire burns to this day.¹

Then he went down-stream until he came to some high rocks, where he met a wolverine, with whom he wished to fight; but the wolverine said, "No, I will not fight with you, and you cannot catch me." He then tried to escape by running up the face of the cliff. Then the beaver said, "Stay there, and never come down." And the wolverine was turned into stone, and can be seen there to this day.²

¹ Beds of lignite along the banks of the Mackenzie a few miles above Bear River, have been burning for a century at least.

² Roche Carcajou, an anticlinal uplift of Devonian limestone, one thousand feet high.

As he continued his journey down the river he went so fast at one place that he created the "Sans Sault" Rapid.¹ As the beaver went on down the river he was discovered and pursued by a giant, to whom he said, "If you can clear all the rocks from the river, you may kill me, but if you cannot clear the river you will never kill me." In his efforts to clear the channel the giant overturned his canoe, which turned into stone, and to this day forms an island in the bed of the stream.² Failing to accomplish his task, the giant said, "I cannot kill you; but never mind, there will soon be plenty of men here who will always hunt you and all your tribe." The beaver replied, "Since you cannot kill me, keep still a while, and I will paint your picture." Then the beaver painted the picture of the giant on one side of the ramparts,³ where it may be seen to this day. After this the giant left the country.

V. ORIGIN OF THE PINE (TSĚ-VI).

There were a number of Indians in a camp who went away one by one and were lost. At last only one remained, and he also decided to leave the camp. He soon encountered a wolverine, which said, "I know who you are; you will have to go before me." As they went along they came out upon the river at a point where the bank was very steep. The wolverine said, "You must slide down." So the Indian slid down the bank, and the wolverine ran around through a ravine. When the man reached the bottom, he caused his nose to bleed, and put some of the blood on a spear, and then laid down and feigned death. When the wolverine reached the spot where the man lay, he took him up and carried him to his camp across the river. After placing him in the middle of the camp he began to sharpen his knife. The man soon opened his eyes and looked for a stick; when he found a stick he sprang up and killed all the wolverines except one young one which ran up a tree. The man blew his nose and threw the phlegm at the tree, and it was transformed into a pine. The wolverine then said, "That will do for your arrows; now you must leave me alone."

¹ The only rapid in the Mackenzie River of any consequence, and one that is easily passed by the steamers in any but the lowest stages of water.

² An island at the Sans Sault Rapid divides the stream into an eastern and a western channel, the latter being "the steamboat channel."

³ At the ramparts the Mackenzie, much contracted in width, flows between vertical cliffs of Devonian limestone varying from one hundred to two hundred and fifty feet in height. This gorge is but a few miles south of the Arctic circle, and is one of the most interesting features of the great river.

VI. WHY THE WOLVERINE BECAME A THIEF.

A man went out hunting with a wolverine. They were out three nights, and during the third night the wolverine rose and threw the man's shoes into the fire. In the morning the wolverine deserted the man, leaving him unable to travel. The wolverine then went out with another man, and served him in the same treacherous manner. He went hunting with a third man, and during the first and second nights he was very careful to provide for the man's wants. The third evening they took off their shoes and hung them before the fire, as is the custom of the country. The man soon rose and put on his shoes and again laid down. Later the wolverine got up, and, seeing a pair of shoes, thought they belonged to the man, and threw them into the fire. The next morning, as they rose, the wolverine said, "Where are your shoes?" "On my feet," replied the man. "I have lost mine," said the wolverine; "lend me yours, and I will go and get a pair for you." But the man refused. Just as he was leaving the camp the wolverine put his forefoot in the fire and burned it. "I will never hunt for myself again, but will always live by robbing the caches of the people." And that is why the wolverine is such a thief.

Frank Russell.